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Gonorrhea Cases Rise: PCDOH Urges Testing During STD Awareness Month and Afterwards

BREWSTER, NY— Cases of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) continue to rise in Putnam County and around the U.S. In 2017, gonorrhea cases in particular rose in Putnam—nearly 60 percent, with an increase from 17 to 27 reported cases from 2016 to 2017. At the same time both chlamydia and syphilis numbers remained relatively stable, after a dramatic rise of 125 percent in syphilis the year before. In fact, in 2015 the highest numbers of syphilis cases were reported in the U.S. since 1995. These increases worry public health officials both locally and nationwide.

For April, National STD Awareness Month, the Putnam County Department of Health, together with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other partners are reaching out with the message “Treat Me Right.” This theme is meant to underscore the importance of a trusting patient/provider relationship, both for receiving the best care and also for providing it. For patients this includes learning as much as they can about STDs and how to protect themselves; for providers it means building trust by listening to patients in a way they feel heard and respected.

“The doctor/patient rapport is a key ingredient to all successful medical care,” said Interim Health Commissioner Michael J. Nesheiwat, M.D., “and something physicians value when practicing medicine. The resurgence of sexually transmitted diseases is quite serious. If untreated, these diseases can cause severe health problems. The health department is spearheading efforts and partnering with local physicians to increase appropriate testing. In this way we can stem this trend.”

Gonorrhea is the second most common STD after chlamydia. Nationwide, there have been nearly half a million cases of gonorrhea since 2015, compared to over 1.5 million cases of chlamydia. Syphilis, the third most common, has affected approximately 27,000 individuals during the same time period. The problem with all STDs is that often a person will have no symptoms, or the symptoms may be similar to other problems. For example, a woman with

gonorrhea may experience mild symptoms such as pain or burning when urinating, which might be easily mistaken for a bladder infection.

Chlamydia's skyrocketing increases have resulted in a new public health law and practice called EPT for expedited patient therapy. This encourages physicians treating patients with chlamydia to provide their patients with an additional prescription for their partner (or partners), without examining or even speaking to the partner.

Syphilis has a unique set of challenges of its own. Because it develops in stages, a variety of symptoms may go unnoticed and clear up without treatment. During the initial stage, painless sores develop and through direct contact with these sores during any sexual activity (vaginal, anal or oral), the disease spreads. Second-stage symptoms may include a faint skin rash, internal sores, fever, sore throat, swollen lymph nodes, patchy hair loss, weight loss, muscle aches and tiredness. This is followed by a latent period during which there are no signs or symptoms, but the disease continues. A person can potentially transmit the disease to a sexual partner for up to a year after the initial infection.

Anyone is at risk, but some groups are more affected, including young people aged 15 to 24 years of age, gay and bisexual men, and pregnant women. The good news is that there are medications that can be prescribed for all STDs, and some can be cured. The only sure way to know if someone has an STD is to be tested. Primary care providers can order tests and prescribe the right treatments. For those who are under- or uninsured, Putnam County's federally qualified health center Open Door provides these services free, or on a sliding scale. The office is located at 155 Main Street in Brewster. Their phone number is 845-279-6999. For questions about prevention, symptoms or transmission, contact the communicable disease nurse at the health department at 808-1390.

The mission of the Putnam County Department of Health, nationally accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB), is to improve and protect the health of the Putnam County community, composed of nearly 100,000 residents. Core services include community health assessment, disease surveillance and control, emergency preparedness, environmental health protection, family health promotion and health education. For more information, please visit our County website at www.putnamcountyny.com; or visit our social media sites on Facebook at www.facebook.com/putnamhealth and Twitter @PutnamHealthNY.

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